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# ADVOCATE OF PEACE.

MARCH AND APRIL, 1847.

## THE ALLEGED RIGHT OF WAR IN GOVERNMENT.

BY THE LATE W. E. CHANNING, D. D.

It is the common and almost universal belief, that the right of war belongs to civil government. Let us be just to human nature. The idea of Right has always mixed itself with war; and this has kept out of view the real character of most of the conflicts of nations. The sovereign, regarding the right of war as an essential attribute of sovereignty, has on this ground ascribed a legitimacy to all national hostilities, and has never dreamed that in most of his wars he was a murderer. So the subject has thought himself bound to obey his sovereign, and, on this ground, has acquitted himself of crime, has perhaps imputed to himself merit, in fighting and slaughtering for the defence of the most iniquitous claims. Here lies the delusion which we should be the most anxious to remove. It is the legality, ascribed to war on account of its being waged by government, which produces insensibility to its horrors and crimes. When a notorious robber, seized by Alexander, asked the conqueror of the world, whether he was not a greater robber than himself, the spirit of the hero repelled the title with indignation. And why so? Had he not, without provocation or cause, spoiled cities and realms, whilst the robber had plundered only individuals and single dwellings? Had he not slaughtered ten thousand innocent fellow-creatures for one victim who had fallen under the robber's knife? And why then did the arch-robber disclaim the name, and seriously believe, that he could not justly be confounded with ruffians? Because he was a King, the head of a state, and as such, authorized to make war. Here was the shelter for his conscience and his fame. Had the robber, after addressing his question to Alexander, turned to the Macedonian

soldier, and said to him, "Are you not too, a greater robber than I? Have not your hands been busier in pillage? Are they not dyed more deeply in innocent blood?" The unconscious soldier, like his master, would have repelled the title; and why? "I am a subject," he would have replied, "and bound to obey my sovereign; and, in fulfilling a duty, I cannot be sunk to the level of the most hated criminal." Thus king and subject take refuge in the right of war which is supposed to inhere in sovereignty, and thus the most terrible crimes are perpetrated with little reproach.

I need not tell you, that there are Christians who, to strip war of this pretext or extenuation, deny that this right exists; who teach, that Jesus Christ has wrested the sword from the magistrate as truly as from the private man. On this point I shall not now enter. I believe, that more good may be done, in the present instance, by allowing to government the right of war. I still maintain, that most wars bring the guilt of murder on the government by whom they are declared, and on the soldier by whom they are carried on, so that our sensibility ought in no degree to be impaired by the supposed legitimacy of national hostilities.

I will allow, that government has the right of war. But a right has bounds; and when these are transgressed by us, it ceases to exist; and we are as culpable, as if it had never existed. A higher authority than man's defines this terrible prerogative. Wo! wo to him, who impatiently, selfishly, spurns the restraints of God, and winks out of sight the crime of sending forth the sword to destroy, because, as a sovereign, he has the right of war.

From its very nature, this right should be exercised above all others anxiously, deliberately, fearfully. It is the right of passing sentence of death on thousands of our fellow-creatures. If any action on earth ought to be performed with trembling, with deep prostration before God, with the most solemn inquisition into motives, with the most reverent consultation of conscience, it is a declaration of war. This stands alone among acts of legislation. It has no parallel. These few words, "Let war be," have the power of desolation which belongs to earthquakes and lightnings; they may stain the remotest seas with blood; may wake the echoes of another hemisphere with the thunders of artillery; may carry anguish into a thousand human abodes. Terrible is the responsibility, beyond that of all others, which falls on him who involves nations in war. He has no excuse for rashness, passion, or private ends. He ought at such a moment to forget, to annihilate himself. The spirit of God and

justice should alone speak and act through him. To commit this act rashly, passionately, selfishly, is to bring on himself the damnation of a thousand murders. An act of legislation commanding fifty thousand men to be assembled on Boston common, there to be shot, stabbed, trampled under horses' feet, until their shrieks and agonies should end in death, would thrill us with horror. Yet such an act is a declaration of war; and a government which can perform it, without the most solemn sense of responsibility, and the clearest admonitions of duty, deserves to endure the whole amount of torture which it has inflicted on its fellow-creatures.

I have said, a declaration of war stands alone. There is one act which approaches it, and which indeed is the very precedent on which it is founded. I refer to the signing of a death-warrant by a chief magistrate. In this case, how anxious is society that the guilty only should suffer! The offender is first tried by his peers, and allowed the benefit of skilful counsel. The laws are expounded, and the evidence weighed, by learned and upright judges; and when, after these protections of innocence, the unhappy man is convicted, he is allowed to appeal for mercy to the highest authority of the State, and to enforce his own cry by solicitations of friends and the people; and when all means of averting his doom fail, religion, through her ministers, enters his cell, to do what yet can be done for human nature in its most fallen, miserable state. Society does not cast from its bosom its most unworthy member without reluctance, without grief, without fear of doing wrong, without care for his happiness. But wars, by which thousands of the unoffending and worthiest perish, are continually proclaimed by rulers in madness, through ambition, through infernal policy, from motives which rank them with the captains of pirate-ships, or leaders of banditti.

It is time that the right of war should not shield governments from the infamy due to hostilities to which selfish, wicked passions give birth. Let rulers learn, that for this right, they are held to a fearful responsibility. Let a war, not founded in plain justice and necessity, never be named but as Murder. Let the Christian give articulate voice to the blood that cries from the earth against rulers by whom it has been criminally shed. Let no soft terms be used. On this subject, a new moral sense, and a new language, are needed throughout the civilized and Christian world; and just in proportion as the truth shall find a tone, war will cease.

But the right of war, which is said to belong to sovereignty, not only keeps out of sight the enormous guilt of rulers in almost all

national conflicts; it also hides or extenuates the frequent guilt of subjects in taking part in the hostilities which their rulers declare. In this way, much of the prevalent insensibility to the evils of war is induced, and perhaps on no point is light more needed. The ferocity and cruelty of armies impress us little, because we look on them as doing a work of duty. The subject or citizen, as we think, is bound to obey his rulers. In his worst deeds as a soldier, he is discharging his obligations to the State; and thus murder and pillage, covered with a cloak of duty, excite no deep, unaffected reprobation and horror.

I know it will be asked, "Is not the citizen bound to fight at the call of his government? Does not his commission absolve him from the charge of murder, or enormous crime? Is not obedience to the sovereign power the very foundation on which society rests?" I answer, has the duty of obeying government no bounds? Is the human sovereign a God? Is his sovereignty absolute? If he command you to slay a parent, must you obey? If he forbid you to worship God, must you obey? Have you no right to judge his acts? Have you no self-direction? Is there no unchangeable right which the ruler cannot touch? Is there no higher standard than human law? These questions answer themselves. A declaration of war cannot sanction wrong, or turn murder into a virtuous deed. Undoubtedly, as a general rule, the citizen is bound to obey the authorities under which he lives. No difference of opinion as to the mere expediency of measures, will warrant opposition. Even in cases of doubtful right, he may submit his judgment to the law. But when called to do what his conscience clearly pronounces wrong, he must not waver. No outward law is so sacred as the voice of God in his own breast. He cannot devolve on rulers an act so solemn, as the destruction of fellow-beings convicted of no offence. For no act will more solemn inquisition be made at the bar of God.

I maintain, that the citizen, before fighting, is bound to inquire into the justice of the cause which he is called to maintain with blood, and bound to withhold his hand, if his conscience condemn the cause. On this point he is able to judge. No political question, indeed, can be determined so easily as this of war. War can be justified only by plain, palpable necessity; by unquestionable wrongs which, as patient trial has proved, can in no other way be redressed; by the obstinate, persevering invasion of solemn and unquestionable rights. The justice of war is not a mystery for cabinets to solve. It is not a state-secret which we must take on trust. It lies within our reach. We are bound to examine it.

The presumption is always against the justice and necessity of war. This we learn from the spirit of all rulers and nations towards foreign states. It is partial, unjust. Individuals may be disinterested; but nations have no feeling of the tie of brotherhood to their race. A base selfishness is the principle on which the affairs of nations are commonly conducted. A statesman is expected to take advantage of the weakness and wants of other countries. How loose a morality governs the intercourse of states! What falsehoods and intrigues are licensed by diplomacy! What nation regards another with true friendship? What nation makes sacrifices to another's good? What nation is as anxious to perform its duties, as to assert its rights? What nation chooses to suffer wrong, rather than to inflict it? What nation lays down the everlasting law of right, casts itself fearlessly on its principles, and chooses to be poor, or to perish rather than to do wrong? Can communities so selfish, so unfriendly, 'so unprincipled, so unjust, be expected to wage righteous wars? Especially if with this selfishness are joined national prejudices, antipathies, and exasperated passions, what else can be expected in the public policy but inhumanity and crime? An individual, we know, cannot be trusted in his own cause, to measure his own claims, to avenge his own wrongs; and the civil magistrate, an impartial umpire, has been substituted as the only means of justice. But nations are even more unfit than individuals to judge in their own cause; more prone to push their rights to excess, and to trample on the rights of others; because nations are crowds, and crowds are unawed by opinion, and more easily inflamed by sympathy into madness. Is there not then always a presumption against the justice of war?

This presumption is increased, when we consider the false notions of patriotism and honor which prevail in nations. Men think it a virtuous patriotism to throw a mantle, as they call it, over their country's infirmities, to wink at her errors, to assert her most doubtful rights, to look jealously and angrily on the prosperity of rival states; and they place her honor not in unfaltering adherence to the right, but in a fiery spirit, in quick resentment, in martial courage, and especially in victory. Can a good man hold himself bound to engage in war at the dictate of such a state?

The citizen or subject, you say, may innocently fight at the call of his rulers; and I ask, who are his rulers? Perhaps an absolute sovereign, looking down on his people as another race, as created to toil for his pleasure, to fight for new provinces, to bleed for his renown. There are indeed republican governments. But were not

the republics of antiquity as greedy of conquest, as prodigal of human life, as steeled against the cries of humanity, as any despots who ever lived? And if we come down to modern republics, are they to be trusted with our consciences? What does the Congress of these United States represent? Not so much the virtue of the country, as a vicious principle, the spirit of party. It acts not so much for the people as for parties; and are parties upright? Are parties merciful? Are the wars to which party commits a country, generally just?

Unhappily, public men, under all governments, are, of all moral guides, the most unsafe, the last for a Christian to follow. Public life is thought to absolve men from the strict obligations of truth and justice. To wrong an adverse party, or another country, is not reprobated, as are wrongs in private life. Thus duty is dethroned; thus the majesty of virtue is insulted in the administration of nations. Public men are expected to think more of their own elevation than of their country. Is the city of Washington the most virtuous spot in this republic? Is it the school of incorruptible men? Public bodies want conscience. Men acting in masses, shift off responsibility on one another. Multitudes never blush. If these things be true, then I maintain, that the Christian has not a right to take part in war blindly, confidently, at the call of his rulers. To shed the blood of fellow-creatures, is too solemn a work to be engaged in lightly. Let him not meet on the field his brother man, his brother Christian, in a cause on which Heaven frowns. Let him bear witness against unholy wars, as his country's greatest crimes. If called to take part in them, let him deliberately refuse. If martial law seize on him, let him submit. If hurried to prison, let him submit. If brought thence to be shot, let him submit. There must be martyrs to peace as truly as to other principles of our religion. The first Christians chose to die, rather than obey the laws of the state which commanded them to renounce their Lord. "Death rather than crime!"—such is the good man's watch-word; such the Christian's vow. Let him be faithful unto death.

Undoubtedly it will be objected, that if one law of the state may in any way be resisted, then all may be, and so government must fall. This is precisely the argument on which the doctrine of passive obedience to the worst tyrannies rests. The absolutist says, "if one government may be overturned, none can stand. Your right of revolution is nothing but the right of anarchy, of universal misrule." The reply is in both instances the same. Extreme cases speak for themselves. We must put confidence in the common sense of men,

and suppose them capable of distinguishing between reasonable laws, and those which require them to commit manifest crimes. The objection which we are considering, rests on the supposition, that a declaration of war is a common act of legislation, bearing no strong marks of distinction from other laws, and consequently to be obeyed as implicitly. But it is broadly distinguished. A declaration of war sends us forth to destroy our fellow-creatures, to carry fire, sword, famine, bereavement, want and woe into the fields and habitations of our brethren; whilst Christianity, conscience, and all the pure affections of our nature, call us to love our brethren, and to die, if need be, for their good. And from whence comes this declaration of war? From men who would rather die than engage in unjust or unnecessary conflict? Too probably, from men to whom Christianity is a name, whose highest law is honor; who are used to avenge their private wrongs, and defend their reputations by shedding blood, and who, in public as in private life, defy the laws of God. Whoever at such men's dictation, engages in war, without solemnly consulting conscience, and inquiring into the justice of the cause, contracts great guilt; nor can the "right of war" which such men claim as rulers, absolve him from the crimes and woes of the conflict in which he shares.

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#### MISCONCEPTIONS RESPECTING THE SOCIETY.

WE find, since the issue of our last number, some misconceptions of our Society afloat in certain quarters, and deem it proper to correct them by simply re-stating our position and course. When the public, nearly ten years ago, were led by the Non-Resistance Society to confound our enterprise with theirs, we merely republished, to the entire satisfaction of our friends, a tract which had been stereotyped by us several years before under the eye of our founder, the late William Ladd; and the most effectual way to rectify erroneous impressions now, would be, if we had space, to send forth that same tract as the best exposition we could give of the course we have uniformly pursued.

The Society, *as such*, has never departed from that course; but, in consequence of positions taken by some of our official representatives on their own responsibility, the impression, whether right or wrong, prevailed for a time among our friends, if not generally in the community, that we were blending a variety of foreign topics with the cause of peace. The question could no longer be evaded;